

Family members
serving together

BY JEFF SMITH



All in the Family

Three-year-olds are fascinating to observe ... from a distance. Let me rephrase that ... from a long, long distance away. That may sound cruel, especially to those of you who work with 3s or oversee volunteers to pre-K children. But when my church asked me to teach a classroom filled with recent graduates of the “terrible 2s”, my first instinct was to say “No.”

As was my second instinct.

And my third.

After nearly two decades in grade school and middle school ministry, 3s was foreign territory for me. But one unexpected option changed my mind. My two daughters could join me as youth helpers. Neither had served before in church. This would provide them a chance to begin learning a valuable spiritual discipline, stretch spiritually and connect more to our church body. So I swallowed hard and accepted the sentence ... er ... offer.

Three years later, a miracle has taken place. I’m still volunteering with this age group. In fact, I’ve grown to really love the kids in my care. I’m thankful God called me to this new season of ministry.

The two most important tools God has employed to keep me faithfully involved are my tween daughters. Serving alongside Jessica and Nicki has increased my commitment to our class. They have even kept me sane in the inevitably hairy moments. Serving with them is such a privilege. As a parent, watching them learn and mature as young servants of Christ is extremely gratifying. God is using my service to not only touch 3-year-olds’ lives but my daughters’ lives as well.

My story isn’t unique. I’m sure you know families in similar situations in your church. Family members involved in ministry together is a “win-win-win” proposition. Families grow, the church benefits, and both church members and guests reap the rewards.



It only makes sense that children are less likely to quit church the more connected they are to it.

Serving together also gives parents another family discipleship tool. Michelle and Michael Bowen intentionally include their kids in their children's ministry involvement. The results have been dramatic. "Our children go with us to children's programming and planning meetings and come with me when I visit families," Michelle says. "What do I notice about my children? They have a heart for others. When they see a need someone has, they ask if they can help. When they see someone hurting, they offer to pray. My children are sensitive to others' needs and understand serving God's people is serving God. To them, it's a way of life. I can't think of a better form of discipleship than bringing my children with me when I serve!"

I see similar outcomes with my daughters' ministry involvement. Nicki is painfully shy. She did not utter a word to any student in our class her first two months as a helper. But slowly God has drawn her out of her shell. Today she is adept at gently approaching a child who's alone and lovingly interacting with her, whether through coloring, playing with toys or reading her a book.

My daughter Jessica has "leadership potential." This is code for a bossy streak. She is learning to lead with a more gracious, servant-minded heart. And I'm right there to train, encourage and support them on the spot. My girls are growing spiritually in ways that would not happen if we weren't serving together.

There's another side benefit for churches and families alike. It only makes sense that children are less likely to quit church the more connected they are to it. Various studies show at least half of evangelicals abandon church after high school. But that likelihood should decrease the more engaged our children are in their childhood church. By serving the church, kids form additional bonds with their church that are less apt to be broken when they leave home.

How the church body benefits

Your church attenders also benefit from committed families serving together in your kids' ministry. Here are a few ways how.

- 1 Children are served by dedicated volunteers who faithfully fulfill their roles.
- 2 Children are impacted by volunteers who serve with extra joy alongside members of their family.
- 3 Children build stronger relationships with volunteers because of these volunteers' faithful attendance and motivated hearts.
- 4 Parents of children develop connections with volunteers who consistently and lovingly work with their children.
- 5 Families appreciate your ministry more because of the outstanding volunteer service their children enjoy.
- 6 Other families decide to do ministry together after witnessing the impact of families serving their own children.

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Family ministry and home discipleship are red hot topics in churches. Getting more families involved together in kids' ministry is a natural extension of these philosophies. Uniting the institutions of family and church in meaningful ministry service is a powerful combination. The next time you prepare a recruiting campaign, make families a vital part of your strategy. ❖

Jeff Smith is editorial manager at Awana. He's also served in children's ministry at his church for 20 years, including a stint as everyone's favorite purple dinosaur while drama team director. His favorite roles in life are as husband to Kelly and dad to Jessica and Nicki.

How your church benefits

Volunteer recruitment and retention are chronic problems in most churches. I'm preaching to the choir here. But, as I explained from my own experience, family involvement can strengthen ministry commitment. Being connected in ministry with another family member, or their entire family, is a crucial reason why some volunteers serve a church faithfully for years. These volunteers fortify your ministry. They give you a strong leadership or behind-the-scenes core you can roll up your sleeves with to spiritually impact youth and families.

An extraordinary example is a couple from Lake Zurich, Illinois. Bob and Lucille Wallace have served together in Harvest Bible Chapel's Awana ministry for over 30 years. Bob is 85 and Lucille is 82, but they're relishing ministry together too much to even consider quitting.

"We love Awana. We love kids," Bob says. "I really enjoy hearing my group of boys recite Bible verses."

The Wallaces have passed this ministry legacy to their now-grown children. Three of the five children are Awana leaders at their own churches alongside their spouses. All five attend church regularly. One daughter and one grandchild work with the Wallaces in Awana at Harvest. Lucille says Mondays at Awana are a highlight of her week. You can understand why. The depth, passion and longevity of the Wallaces' ministry involvement is no surprise to Larry Fowler, based on his research for the new book *Rock-Solid Volunteers* and his 40 years in children's ministry.

"Getting the family to serve in ministry together increases commitment," Larry says. "You are going to be much more involved in ministry and much less likely to quit when serving next to a family member."

Unlike many ministries, the structure of children's ministry can be very conducive to welcoming couples, families and even extended families to serve together.

Michelle and Michael Bowen have served together in children's ministry at their church for several years. In *Rock-Solid Volunteers*, Michelle shared, "My husband oversees our Wednesday night ministry and is director for both VBS and overnight camps. I am his assistant. My mother-in-law helps us with children under age 5. His brother and sister-in-law

also serve. I grew up in a family who went to church but never served together. This family is like night and day."

Families today lead hectic lives. Activities tend to pull them apart. A strategy of inviting husbands and wives, parents and children to serve side by side gives families an opportunity to stay together. It also opens doors for your ministry to attract—and retain—more volunteers.

This does raise the question of how whole families or multiple family members can serve together. Examine your ministry environment. What programs have the need or flexibility for family involvement?

- A weeknight ministry may fit nicely with families' schedules. For instance, Mom might supervise volunteers, Dad lead games and their preteen and teen children serve as helpers or small-group shepherds.
- Your weekend service classes for younger children might be flexible enough for whole-family participation.
- Does your church encourage parents to serve in ministries and classes that their children attend? Some parents are more motivated to serve if they can be with their kids.
- Do you offer church service projects for kids in your community?
- VBS is an ideal short-term ministry for families to join together.
- Outreach events to children offer numerous roles for both parents and kids.
- Do you organize family mission trips?
- Does your church run a ministry to families?
- What specializations does your children's ministry utilize? Drama team? Music team? Choir? Creative arts? Special events team? Welcome team? Set-up crew? Tech team?

How families benefit

Larry Fowler has discovered three significant advantages to families' joint involvement in ministry.

- Getting families involved together increases commitment.
- Getting families involved together increases spiritual conversations at home.
- Getting families involved together improves discipleship.

We explored the first benefit earlier. The second benefit has beautifully manifested itself in my home. My fifth-grade daughters and I pray together for our class of 3-year-olds. After class, we review the day's never dull moments on our ride home. There's no shortage of events to discuss! We assess ways to improve our class. I also talk with my girls about setting a Christ-like example for the kids and how teaching Scripture to 3-year-olds builds a biblical faith foundation. Ultimately, volunteering together has given us a shared spiritual activity with more eternal value than any mutual hobby. ▶▶

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